

## Bringing Reciprocity to Service-Learning Research and Practice

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*In this practitioner's perspective on service-learning research the author calls for a more empirically-based approach to practice and a more practical approach to research. A more empirically-based approach to practice can enable practitioners to strengthen their programs and influence the direction of research. A practice-oriented approach to research can enable researchers to identify and document service-learning's outcomes as well as methods for achieving those outcomes, which will strengthen practitioners' capacity to develop and implement exemplary programs and courses. Recommendations are made to bring practitioners and researchers together to strengthen future directions for service-learning research.*

The end of the Twentieth Century has been kind to service-learning. What was once a very marginal, largely unheard of "alternative education" strategy has now become almost commonplace in the curricula of both secondary and post-secondary education institutions. There are many reasons for this rapid proliferation — pioneering work of early practitioners; support by presidents on their respective campuses and through Campus Compact; and "Learn and Serve America Higher Education" financial support available through the Corporation for National Service. Another important contributor to this proliferation is the small, but growing body of research that has begun to demonstrate the positive outcomes associated with service-learning for students, communities, faculty, institutions and schools (Eyler, Giles, & Gray, 1999). This literature has enabled service-learning advocates to demonstrate that the numerous positive outcomes of this pedagogy are based on more than just conjecture or faith. Research has demonstrated that students learn faster and more deeply through service-learning than in more traditional forms of education. Communities are served. Schools and institutions change.

The advances in both service-learning practice and research are good news indeed — surprisingly good news to those of us who experienced service-learning's early days. But, while celebrating these considerable achievements, we should ask if this research has affected practice in any substantive way. After all, one purpose for conducting research is to improve practice in a field. Unfortunately, as I listen to service-learning practitioners, I do not hear them describe their work as influenced by service-learning research to any substantial degree. One reason for this may be the activist learning and working styles most of us bring to our work. Perhaps we need to

change our orientation toward empirically-based knowledge. The other explanation for this research-practice gap may lie in the outcomes-oriented goals and direction most service-learning research has taken so far. If this research is to play a stronger role in affecting practice, service-learning researchers may need to expand both the foci and methods they utilize to examine the field.

### The Nature of Service-Learning Practitioners

We know from research into the history of service-learning (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999) that its early practitioners were drawn to this work to contribute to community and student development, and to change K-12 schools and universities. These pioneers were organizers and tinkerers feeling their way toward establishing an alternative and what they suspected was a potentially very powerful pedagogy. While not opposed to theoretical literature, these practitioners tended to use it to explain their work rather than to inform it. Early practitioners of service-learning developed their instructional methods from a gut sense of what worked through trial and error, rather than from any carefully conducted research or evaluation. In a way, they were experiential learners using non-systematic means to make the academy a more supportive and enabling place for other experiential learners.

While there has yet to be any comparable research into the current practitioner pool, many of today's service-learning educators appear to have similar approaches to practice. Like the pioneers, many are activists focused on developing and sustaining their programs, serving communities, and empowering and educating their students. These are complicated tasks, for sure. But like most active professionals,

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including teachers, they tend to form their practice more from a casual, anecdotal, observational approach to what "works" in their own experience and that of their colleagues than from their own or others' systematic analysis of carefully undertaken observation, evaluation, or other forms of inquiry.

There are both positive and limiting aspects to this 'experiential' approach to professional work. If they are conscious, reflective experiential learners, with some awareness of their foibles, practitioners will be sensitive to what is happening in their programs and open to change when it is appropriate. On the other hand, since a critical task in effective experiential learning is perceiving experience clearly, not through lenses clouded with bias, past experience, and ideology, practitioners may not always "see" what is really happening, or their explanations for what they see may be colored. As Dewey (1951) admonished us, experience can be "mis-educative."

In addition, we practitioners often fail to apply to our own work the findings of experiential learning theorists such as David Kolb [who defined learning as the transformation of experience through critical reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (1984)]. Due to time pressures, multiple tasks and responsibilities, and to our activist nature we may fail to utilize the reflective processes (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Schön, 1983, 1987) which we require of our students. And, even if we reflect critically on our work, we often fail to think through, develop, and articulate researchable questions about it, much less investigate these questions in any systematic way.

The consequence may be that we are doing our programs and courses a disservice. For example, we may assume that discussion of students' service experiences in the context of assigned, relevant readings provides an effective praxis experience for students, enabling them to link specific theories with specific phenomena they have observed. However, do we really know how to facilitate such discussion most effectively? What does an effective praxis discussion look like in terms of participation and leadership of all involved? What would it sound like in terms of content, facts, story-telling, etc.? Content analyses of systematic observations, interviews, and dialogues could yield answers to these questions. We could conduct these explorations ourselves, as advocated by classroom assessment leaders Angelo and Cross (1993), or we could call upon our more research-oriented colleagues to take them on.

Finally, in addition to undertaking our own research, we practitioners must better utilize existing scholarship, which has the potential for improving practice. Do we follow the literature? Have we tested

those findings we come across that have relevance to our work? Do we dialogue with our research colleagues about the degree to which we see their scholarship as applicable, or have we attempted in any concerted way to influence what and how they research? If we fail to explore these kinds of questions both among ourselves and with the research community, we risk short-changing our students, our community partners, and ourselves — as individual practitioners and as a collective, hopefully maturing profession.

### Changing Researchers and Research

Those who have been conducting service-learning research have also contributed to the practice-research gap in this field. Part of this has to do with the fact that, for a variety of very good reasons, most service-learning research has tended to focus more on outcomes than on the methods needed to achieve those outcomes. This is largely because much of the research has been funded by foundations and government agencies, which seek to better understand the results of their investment in expanding and institutionalizing service-learning practice. This prioritizing of outcomes is also due to the fact that practitioners, education leaders, and interested researchers have all been grasping for empirical evidence that will support their efforts to advocate for service-learning — in the academy, with funders, and with policy makers. So, service-learning research in its infancy, even when practitioners have carried it out, has been supported by and intended primarily for audiences other than practitioners. Therefore, regardless of practitioners' posture toward empirical knowledge, it was not likely to have much impact on practice.

In order for this to change researchers must focus more of their inquiries on the actual phenomena of service-learning practice as well as its outcomes. While practices and outcomes are obviously interconnected, we need to know much more than we do now about what makes the components of service-learning pedagogy effective — for students, community partners, faculty, and institutions.

Eyler and Giles (1999) have made an important contribution to this bridge-building by identifying program components (i.e., placement quality, application, written reflection, discussion, diversity, and community voice) that are predictors of good service-learning outcomes for students. But their efforts were not intended to reveal in any detail how these components work most effectively. There are numerous questions in need of research related to each of these components that have crossed my mind as I have designed and facilitated service-learning over the years.

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For example, Eyler and Giles (1999) describe placement quality as "a context in which students can exercise initiative, take responsibility, and work as peers with practitioners and community members" (p. 169). Graham (1974), writing about experiential learning in general, identifies the "right" placement for an individual student as providing that student with "a manageable confrontation with novel responsibility." Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) offer a framework for linking students' service interests with their emotional and intellectual development. These and other developmental models can be helpful to practitioners as they consider site placements for students. But, they will not be drawn upon in a regular way by practitioners until we can more concretely describe and assess the stages of developing capacity of diverse students and the "manageability" of new responsibilities in service placements in order to make the most appropriate match. This is a major methodological challenge for service-learning research.

Furthermore, what are the most effective methods for enabling students to, "link what they are doing in the classroom to what they are experiencing in the community and vice versa," the "application" component to service-learning identified by Eyler and Giles (1999) as "often the strongest predictor of learning outcomes, problem-solving and critical thinking, and perspective transformation" (p. 170). How do students "see" and experience these applications? What does the teacher do? What work does she and the community partner/supervisor assign and how do they respond to the assignments? While it was beyond the scope of Eyler and Giles' research to identify and describe best pedagogical practices that enable students to make classroom-community links, we need to know a lot more about this process than we do now.

With regard to written and oral reflection, while we know that journal assignments and seminar discussions facilitate these processes, we do not know empirically which ones are more effective than others. Should they be interconnected or staged? What other mediums might be used, and how, in order to enable effective reflection and application? Should particular reflection processes be employed based on the gender, ethnicity, or level of academic preparation of a particular group of students, and/or the nature and duration of the service experience? What other variables will influence critical reflection? Research can answer these practice-related questions.

Eyler and Giles (1999) use the term "diversity" to refer to the "opportunity [students have] to work with people from diverse ethnic groups during the course of their service-learning," and describe it as "a pre-

dictor of most measures of stereotype reduction and tolerance and personal development" (p. 177). How does this work? What measures should practitioners employ to ensure the "right" richness of diversity in their programs? In what ways and to what extent do different groups of students experience diversity differently? What orientation processes and on-going attention to diversity issues are most effective in preparing and supporting students to work in multicultural communities? What orientation to diversity should we seek in community partners?

Finally, while Eyler and Giles (1999) identify "community voice" as critical to insuring that students "meet needs identified by members of the community" (p. 178), and include it as a predictor of students' development of community-oriented values (e.g., tolerance, cultural appreciation, reward in service, valuing a career in service, and realizing that community partners "are like me") (p. 179), we still do not know how to best engage the community as an effective partner. What are the most effective ways for practitioners to enable "community voice" to be expressed and heard? How do we most effectively align what community groups desire with what we wish to teach and what we want students to learn? How can our faith in the benefits for both students and communities that arise from mutually interdependent service and learning become more of a science?

To address these questions effectively and offer answers that are both informative and accessible to practitioners, researchers may have to diversify their methods. Quantitative, outcome-focused inquiry will need to be complemented with more inductive, qualitative, and phenomenological approaches. We need "portraits of practice" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Soep Pope, Batenburg, Addison-Jacobson, & Hill, 1995), descriptive pictures of program, classroom, and service placement activities that practitioners can contribute to and learn from as they seek to strengthen the service and learning that take place in their courses and programs. Just as practitioners must become more interested in and more effective advocates for practice-oriented research, researchers and those who support them will have to become more interested in describing, reflecting on, and analyzing the practice experience.

### **A Call for Practitioner-Researcher Collaboration**

All too often in service-learning and other professional fields, those who do the work are the specimens to be examined by those who do the research. The goals for, and direction of, systematic inquiry into the impact of a field and its practice are mainly

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set by those outside the scope of inquiry. As outsiders, they look in to see what is happening. Practitioners, those who have the most at stake, become victim-like, even when the researcher's intentions are constructive, by nature of the passive role they play as the observed — a role, as noted above, that they choose as often as they have been assigned.

Practitioners can gain reciprocity and redress this imbalance by becoming more "research-oriented" in their practice, undertaking a more systematic, reflective, inquiring, "clinical perspective" (Schein, 1987) toward their work. Articulating hypotheses that result from a more inquiring stance toward practice will enable them to research their practice and have stronger influence on the general direction of service-learning research.

In turn, researchers can do their part to become more allied with the practitioner community by refocusing their inquiries from the end point of service-learning to what happens along the way, and by carefully listening to, collaborating with, and observing the experience of those so engaged — teachers, administrators, students, and the community partners.

My vision would have practitioners and researchers working hand in hand in "participatory" (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Whyte, 1991) or "cooperative" (Wagner, 1988) research seeking to understand both the power and the process of effective experience-based service-learning. Our national practitioner organizations could call meetings and offer workshops on collaborative, participatory, service-learning research. 'Collaboratories' or other cooperative structures could be designed and structured to bring together service-learning researchers with practitioners and community partners to investigate practice, and thereby integrate the research function of the academy with both its teaching and service functions in innovative ways. Indeed, since this article has been written from a practitioner's perspective, it necessarily under-represents the perspective of both researchers and community partners. Perhaps the next time this topic is addressed it will be co-developed by a practitioner, a researcher, and a community partner who have overcome barriers that have precluded these groups from working together in the past. Such an undertaking would both reflect and encourage practice and research in this field that is more reciprocal, mutually supporting, and ultimately mutually interdependent.

In these and other ways, practitioners and researchers can work hand in hand to understand both the power and the process of effective, experience-based service-learning. Service-learning research can begin to express the reciprocal values of

service-learning practice, so that research combined with practice "adds value to each and transforms both" (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989).

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